

THURSDAY, OCTOBER 1, 1885

## NORTH AMERICAN WATER-BIRDS

*The Water-Birds of North America.* By S. F. Baird, T. M. Brewer, and R. Ridgway. Two Vols., 4to. (Boston: Little, Brown, and Co., 1884.)

EXPECTATION was roused some years since when tidings came that the "North American Birds" of Prof. Baird, Dr. Brewer, and Mr. Ridgway, of which three volumes had been brought out in 1874, was in process of completion, and at last there appeared two quartos of goodly size under the title of "The Water-Birds of North America," which are not only the sequel to the work just named, but are also issued in continuation of the publications of the Geological Survey of California, of which a single volume on the land-birds of that State, edited by Prof. Baird from the notes of Dr. J. G. Cooper, saw the light in 1870. But, to complicate the matter further, the two quartos now before us form vols. xii. and xiii. of the "Memoirs of the Museum of Comparative Zoology" at Harvard. How all this came about is explained in the introduction by Prof. Whitney, the Californian State Geologist; but the only part that need concern us is the not surprising but still much-to-be-regretted fact that the cost of bringing out the volumes treating of the land-birds of North America was so great as to deter the publishers from continuing the work at their own risk. Most fortunately, then, the combination just mentioned was effected with the result we now see; but it still remains a reproach and humiliation to those interested in birds—not only in North America alone but all the world over—that so excellent a performance was not more encouraged by them. The obstinacy of the public in preferring a bad book to a good one is perhaps observable in almost every science, but that this obstinacy is nowhere more marked than in the case of natural history, and of ornithology in particular may be because it is one of the most popular branches of science, and because nine-tenths of those who pursue it hardly realise the fact that it is capable of serious study. Howbeit we may be sure that the old adage, "*Populus vult decipi*," was not first uttered by a man without worldly knowledge, and to this day experience tells us that it is as true as ever. It will take a long time yet to persuade people that they had better be well informed by an author who writes a book because he knows his subject, than by a badly-informed one who gets up his subject in order to write a book about it—though even this is perhaps saying too much, for many an author, on ornithology at least, has never taken the trouble to learn the rudiments of what he pretends to teach, and if he have but enough self-assurance he will get his claim to instruct allowed by those who are more ignorant than he is.

To all who have been concerned in the production of the text of the two volumes before us we must offer our hearty congratulations, as it is impossible for us to apportion to each anything like his proper share of merit. Besides the naturalists already named, Prof. Whitney states, in his introduction, that in revising the not wholly completed manuscript he has had the assistance of Mr. Allen, so long known as head of the ornithological

department of the Harvard Museum, and that gentleman is therefore entitled to our thanks as much as any one of the others; but moreover it is also advisable to look back to the original preface of Prof. Baird, in which he states that "the most productive source" of the new information published in this work "has been the great amount of manuscript contained in the archives of the Smithsonian Institution in the form of correspondence, elaborate reports and the field-notes of collectors and travellers."

The most important of these, he goes on to say, are those by the late Mr. Kennicott, and several residents in the then Hudson's Bay Company's Territory—Messrs. MacFarlane, Ross, Lawrence Clark, Strachan Jones, and others—besides Messrs. Dale, Bannister, and Henry Elliott in regard to Alaska and its islands. Now this being the case with respect to the former volume, which treated of the land-birds only, the importance of the labours of these gentlemen ought to be far more manifest in the present volumes, which deal with the water-birds, since an overwhelming majority of them have their home in the vast northern regions of the continent, and are only winter-visitors to most of the States and Territories of the Union. A good deal to our disappointment we find it otherwise. It may be that the late Dr. Brewer, who is believed to have been responsible for the "biographical" portion of these as of the former volumes, had not at his death completed the examination of the unpublished materials at his disposal; but certainly there is not so much information from American sources as we had hoped or even expected. On the other hand, European authors are freely, not to say redundantly, laid under contribution for such species as are common to the two continents, which it is needless to say are many. Of this we do not complain, though we confess we should rather have learned how these species behave themselves on the other side of the Atlantic; but there is a want of discrimination as to the opportunities possessed by the different observers quoted, and a lack of proportion as to the value of their observations. We do not say that this is not pardonable, perhaps it was unavoidable; but it is unfortunately no less a drawback; and, to make it worse, several instances might be cited in which absolutely contradictory assertions are reprinted without any attempt to indicate which is thought to be the more worthy of belief; while a good many of the statements to which this objection does not apply are but vain repetitions.

Passing to the descriptive part of the work, we do not hesitate to declare that, so far as we have been able to test it, it is excellent. The "specific characters" given seem really to deserve their name, since they indicate the species, and are not, as has lately become so common, drawn from an individual example. Moreover, they are sufficiently brief to be useful, for we have unfortunately entered upon days when specimens are described at a length that absolutely precludes the practical application of the description. Nothing marks more distinctly the difference between a naturalist and a book-maker than the being able to perceive and to tersely express the characters that are essential to the differentiation of a species. Among ornithologists, merely to cite the example of one who is gone, it seems to have been this faculty that gave the late Mr. Gould such a wonderful pre-eminence among his contemporaries. Others

unquestionably far surpassed him as scientific ornithologists, indeed the scientific value of his works is very slight; but hardly any one had such an eye for a species, or could in a dozen words or so point out how it could be recognised. It is no doubt in consequence of this that so few of the species described by him have failed to be considered good by his successors.

The ornithologists of the New World are in one respect very fortunate. They are not encumbered by the enormous dead weight of synonymy that is so burdensome to their brethren of effete Europe; and, thanks to the steadfastness with which the North Americans follow the use of a nomenclature fixed by authority, they will probably be for ever exempt from much of the evil which afflicts the more independent writers of the Old World, almost each of whom likes to be a law unto himself. Whether the nomenclature now accepted in the United States and in Canada be founded on the best principle is a matter that need not be here discussed. It has been reduced to a practice the real advantage of which none can doubt. But that this state of things is possible arises in great measure from the fact that in one sense a very small number of North American birds have an ancient history such as is possessed by nearly all the European species, though of this ancient history the compilers of synonymy in general give but a feeble notion. Few things are more misleading than a long list of synonyms, such as is too often regarded as a test of an author's industry and knowledge. It almost always happens that in a list of this kind bad accounts and good are made to appear as though they stood, as it were, on an equal footing, and it not unfrequently occurs that a reference to the best account of a species may be wholly omitted, while a fantastic name introduced by some compiler or catalogue-maker, who perhaps never examined or even set eyes on a specimen, receives notice as if it were an important contribution to the history of the creature. If Americans suffered from this grievance to the same extent as Europeans do, we suspect that the ingenuity of the former would lead them to find some remedy for it, but they may bless their stars that they are comparatively free from it.

Every well-informed ornithologist knows that the systematic arrangement of birds presents a series of puzzles which as yet defy solution. Still, some steps towards the clearing away of the old trammels have been taken by various persons, and a few positions that may be looked upon as established have been gained. We are sorry to find so little in these volumes suggestive of further advance. The writers seem to be still enchained in the toils which the artificial system of Sundevall drew around the subject, and in the very brief space—barely two pages—thereto devoted, we have "altricial" and "præcocial," "gymnopaedic," and "dasypaedic" groups spoken of as if they were to be believed in. It is true that the arrangement adopted is said to be "not strictly natural;" but in the same paragraph are some other statements as to affinities or the reverse that we hope the author may live to repent. However we freely admit that the main object of these volumes is not to teach systematic ornithology, and therefore perhaps the less said on that contentious subject the better. They will, there can be no doubt, admirably fulfill the chief purpose for which they are

intended, and enormously further the study of birds in English-speaking America. It would be out of place here to enter upon any minute criticism of their contents, and, while indicating in a general way, as we have attempted to do and as we conceive we are in duty bound, some of their shortcomings, we can strongly recommend them as on the whole justifying the high degree of expectation that had prevailed concerning them prior to their publication. Assuredly we shall have to wait long before another so comprehensive and, taking it all in all, so excellent an account of "The Water Birds of North America" is likely to make its appearance, and once more we tender our thanks to each and every one of those who have been concerned in the work, though we may perhaps make a reservation in regard to the wood-engraver.

### LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

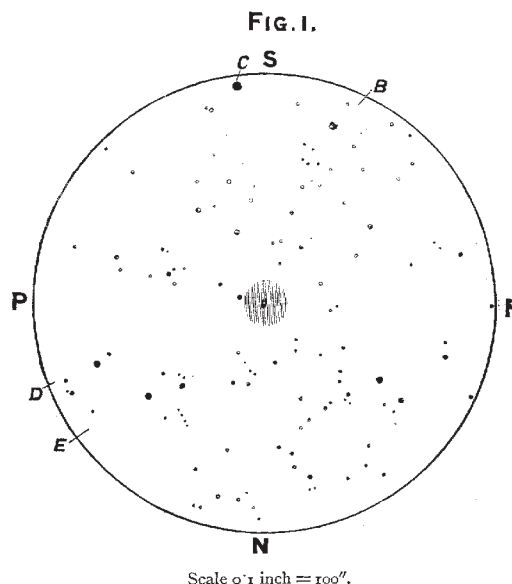
*[The Editor does not hold himself responsible for opinions expressed by his correspondents. Neither can he undertake to return, or to correspond with the writers of, rejected manuscripts. No notice is taken of anonymous communications.]*

*[The Editor urgently requests correspondents to keep their letters as short as possible. The pressure on his space is so great that it is impossible otherwise to insure the appearance even of communications containing interesting and novel facts.]*

#### The New Star in Andromeda

THE information furnished by a photograph of the Great Nebula in Andromeda taken last year may be of value, particularly in relation to the presumed variability of the new star. An examination shows that no star brighter than about the 15th magnitude was then in the position now occupied by the new star.

This photograph was a trial plate taken on August 16 between 10h. and 11h., with an exposure of 30 minutes of the 3-foot reflector. With this exposure the impression of the nebula is very



small for such a bright object as it appears in the telescope, being limited to about 2 minutes of arc around the nucleus (which was bright and round), not much more than is shown on a photograph of the Crab nebula with the same exposure, and not nearly so much as, though a little brighter than, a photograph of the Dumb-bell nebula taken a few days after. A great number of stars are to be seen. A defect in the apparatus then being used for the first time has caused a tilt of the plate and a conse-